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Jordan Phoenix

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, jordan.phoenix@queensu.ca

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By Jordan Phoenix, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Background

Archival appraisal practices have long been a source of debate in the archival community, particularly the process of reappraising existing archival holdings. We have been told for decades that reappraisal and deaccessioning are not only part of good collections management practices[1] but that they are essential in the face of an ever-growing volume of materials arriving on our doorsteps.

The responsible management of archival acquisitions can quickly become unsustainable if reappraisal is not an integral part of the process. This is particularly true with digital materials. Even if appraisal decisions seem prudent, reappraisal becomes increasingly important for digital holdings. The outlay for processing and preserving digital content grows as the volume of accessioned materials increases. And, while storage space for digital content seems a minimal concern, the greater the amount of content we have to manage, the greater the management costs are over time. File formats, affordable storage costs, and software tools now offer the opportunity to enhance management strategies for digital content and move the appraisal/reappraisal discussion productively forward. In this article, I propose the implementation of a metrics-augmented approach to reappraisal as part of an overall management strategy that may be useful especially for digital archives.[2]

Appraisal, Reappraisal, and Backlogs

Archivists often struggle to include reappraisal in their daily operations because they have a finite number of hours to devote to processing and managing their collections. In addition, attending to new accessions often takes priority due to dedicated funding sources associated with them. To add to the daunting processing schedule assigned to large backlogs and the looming influx of thousands or even millions of digital objects arriving with new accessions, reappraising materials may seem like a poor use of limited time and resources.

Traditional appraisal strategies for archival collections typically rely heavily on subjective criteria such as current and anticipated use and functional value of the materials.[3] The National Archives and Records Administration's appraisal policy, for example, is 14 pages long and includes questions such as "How significant are the records for research?"[4] An appraisal strategy that relies primarily on subjective evaluation can result in overretention, underutilized holdings, and inconsistent guidance given to records creators. This can lead to holdings that are infrequently accessed yet continue to consume resources while bringing little tangible value to the institution. Just over 10 years ago, Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner proposed MPLP[5] (More Product, Less Process) as a potential solution to tackle backlogs and the influx of new materials. The basic concept is that less time should be spent accessioning materials, and a simple, high-level description of them should suffice. This approach is particularly appropriate for digital content. Coupling MPLP with a metrics-augmented reappraisal strategy could be a practical way forward for digital archives.

Adding Metrics to Good Guidelines

The Society of American Archivists' (SAA) latest guidelines for reappraisal and deaccessioning call for a more formal and transparent process of deaccessioning.[6] This approach integrates various traditional appraisal techniques with business performance metrics for the purpose of achieving sustainable growth. Metrics and standard, repeatable processes can help to justify appraisal and reappraisal decisions and ultimately establish measurable institutional value. The SAA guidelines call attention to the need for reappraisal as part of the overall management strategy for archival holdings. By combining traditional archival practices with business-driven performance standards, appraisal strategies could be relaxed at the point of acquisition. Through incorporating a recurring reappraisal process into the management of archival holdings, particularly digital archives, less effort could be spent on preliminary appraisal prior to acquisition.

Big Buckets and Time

A metrics-augmented reappraisal strategy starts by intentionally overaccessioning digital records. This means using the big-bucket or macro-appraisal approach and gathering up everything that might be of interest, similar to the National Archives and Records Administration Capstone approach to e-mail.[7] Once accessioned, software tools would be applied to assist in filtering and classifying the content as part of the usual archival processing steps. Over time, through the gathering of use statistics, the archivist will have metrics to augment his or her professional evaluation of the institution's holdings during predetermined

reappraisal periods. This strategy would gauge the value of the materials based on interest shown in particular collections or series as measured in use statistics coupled with a traditional professional assessment of the significance of the materials.

After a predefined period of time, records series or collections that have low use statistics along with low historical value, as determined by professional assessment, would be placed on a watch list for some period of years. While materials are on the watch list, archivists could intentionally use the materials in outreach efforts and programming with the hope that the new attention given them would foster new interest by patrons. At the end of the watch period, materials that continue to be underutilized and are not otherwise assessed to have high value would be marked for deaccessioning. Materials that receive more use or are otherwise assessed to have high value would be taken off the watch list. Once the reappraisal process is completed on a particular set of materials, the clock would start again for another reappraisal cycle.

The specific period of time between reappraisal cycles would be tailored to the specific needs and resources of the institution. Keep in mind that use statistics and other such metrics should never be alone in determining which collections stay and which go. At all times, the expertise of the archivist must be applied when reviewing materials identified as underutilized or unused. Regardless of these metrics, retention may be warranted based on their historical significance.

One Possible Scenario

Here is one possible scenario for how this process might work. Upon acquisition of a collection of digital objects that represents a new record series, software tools would be immediately applied to help filter and classify the materials as a routine step in processing. Upon review of these results, a preliminary reappraisal decision would be made, perhaps calling for a 10-year period prior to conducting a reappraisal. During this time, usage statistics would be collected. At the end of 10 years, if use of the records series fell below the 20th percentile, it would be placed on a watch list for the next 10 years. During this time, the archivist might choose to conduct programming to promote interest in a topic related to the series with the expectation that use would increase. After 20 years passes, if use of the series remains below the 20th percentile, the archivist would prepare to deaccession the materials. At this point, the archivist would still be expected to use her or his professional assessment to retain some or all of the underutilized materials.

Benefits

One benefit of metrics-augmented reappraisal is that firm, number-based evidence supports the decision to deaccession. If the archives makes a collection available to the public that earns no interest even after it has been identified as underutilized and has been intentionally promoted by the institution, it can be reasonably argued that it is a legitimate candidate for deaccessioning. As always, the act of deaccessioning need not be limited to the destruction of the materials. Rather, it may include transfer of the materials to another, more suitable institution or perhaps return to the original donor.

Regardless of the initial appraisal method applied, a metrics-augmented reappraisal strategy can align existing resources and holdings with institutional needs. This approach, relying on technology to gather and evaluate use statistics over time combined with subjective inputs from the archivists should afford the opportunity to focus less on appraising/reappraising acquisitions and more on outreach and programming.

While not a perfect solution for every institution, metrics-augmented reappraisal is a workable approach that is more sustainable in an environment of intense growth and limited resources. In particular, mixed-value content, such as e-mail, can be more easily appraised by archivists and records creators alike. Metrics-augmented reappraisal allows collections to self-distill in an organic yet controlled manner that is reasonably consistent and repeatable between archivists. Without a doubt, metrics can provide both support for both digital and analog preservation strategies and demonstrable value of the return on investment to the institution.

Notes

1. Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," *The American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 143–50.

2. Brent West, Joanne Kaczmarek, and Jordan Phoenix, "Sustainable, Justifiable, Repeatable: A Digital Preservation Strategy Using Metrics-Based (Re)Appraisal," in *Proceedings* (Sidney, AU: iPRES, October 10–11, 2014), 348–50.

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3. Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005).

4. US National Archives and Records Administration, "Strategic Directions: Appraisal Policy" (2007), accessed February 5, 2015, archivess.gov/records-mgmt/initiatives/appraisal.html.

5. Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–63.

6. Reappraisal and Deaccessioning Development and Review Team, "Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning," Society of American Archivists (2012), accessed February 5, 2016, archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForReappraisalAndDeaccessioning-May2012.pdf.

7. US National Archives and Records Administration, "NARA Bulletin" (2013), accessed February 4, 2016, archives.gov/records-mgmt/bulletins/2013/2013-02.html.